OUR BOUNDEN DUTY

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OUR BOUNDEN DUTY

"My bounden duty is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his Church; and to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom."

(*From the Second Office of Instruction*)

WHY should I go to Church regularly? Why should I meet with the congregation every Sunday? These are questions which are asked by many people, and it is the purpose of this pamphlet to suggest an answer to them. It is the hope of those who are responsible for publishing it that you will read it carefully and thoughtfully, taking from it what you believe to be true, and that then you will pass it on to a neighbor. We live in an age which has tended to forget that true freedom is built upon discipline, that democracy involves responsibility. There can be no rebirth of our world unless we return as a people to the disciplines of the spirit which our forefathers knew so well. We will not drift into a good society. The good society will be achieved by a responsible and disciplined people or it will not be achieved at all. It is also clear that the most important problem of our day is a spiritual one. It is the inner life of man, his control of himself, and not his control over the rest of nature, that is the great problem of the present. Let us discuss, then, an ancient discipline of the spirit, that of Church attendance, of Divine Worship. Why should we go to Church regularly? Why should we meet with the congregation every Sunday?

The Praise of God

We are told in the Second Office of Instruction in the Book of Common Prayer that it is our "bounden duty . . . to worship God every Sunday in His Church." The Christian religion teaches that God created all the world, gave us our lives, and is the ultimate Source of everything that we possess. Sometimes in the midst of busy cities, surrounded by the work of man's hand, we forget that we are creatures, and imagine ourselves to be the center of the universe. But stand some day beside the rolling immensity of the sea, or some night beneath the starry majesty of the heavens, and you will see that as a little creature you are dependent upon Another and should thank Him for His bounty and praise Him for His greatness. The creature should render thanks to the Creator, and not to do so is careless ingratitude. Let us put this as bluntly as we can. Either God is the Source of our lives and the Eternal Goal of our lives, or He is not. If He is not, then everything about the Christian Church is false. But if He is the Source and Goal of our lives, certain duties and responsibilities follow inevitably from that fact. It then becomes a question of gratitude or ingratitude. We are interested in facts, and you might pause for a moment, put down this pamphlet, and ask yourself this question, "Do I believe that God is the Creator and End of my life?"

If we do believe in God, then let us recall that He is not a sentimental being. He is a just and holy God who is our Judge, and at the hour of death each of us will come before His judgment seat in a special manner. Our Lord not only offered love and forgiveness to men; He also taught that all our actions upon this earth have " abiding consequences." The inner " feel " of the moral life supports this. Two statements were made by Jesus Christ which make all our lives with their decisions a very serious matter. The first is, " Well done, thou good and faithful servant." The second is, " Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness." We might also recall that He said that He would divide the sheep and the goats. These teachings illustrate the eternal importance of the manner in which we use our earthly talents.

God the Judge

Once again, this teaching is either true or it is not true. But it is not one to be taken lightly. God is not a " grandpapa " who is weakly tolerant of the irresponsibilities of His children. He is the holy, righteous Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who holds our eternal destiny in His hands. He has given us time, talents, and opportunities and some day we will answer for the way in which we have used them. Some reader of this tract may say that this teaching is strict, exacting, that it sounds like " old-time religion." That is precisely what it is — the Bible teaching that calls us in every sphere of life from spiritual sleep to responsible living. Each man, it is true, must ultimately follow his own conscience, and there may at times be good reason why you

cannot attend Church or give for its work. That is a question which rests on each person's conscience and we must be careful not to judge lest we be judged. But still, the statement that Sunday morning is the only morning that we have to sleep (Divine Worship at 11 A.M.) sounds very tinny and irresponsible in our own ears, and I do not think that the God who gave us life, health, and the voices with which to praise Him — who looks into our hearts — finds it any more convincing than we do. Church attendance is just one aspect of responsible living.

Our Duty to the Fellowship

The Church is a fellowship of worshipers. It is a divine organization with a divine mission. Christ said that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. But, while we have Christ's assurance that it will not be stamped out, the actual health and the large effectiveness of the Church depend upon each of us. We support that fellowship with our gifts, our work, our presence in Church, our songs, and prayers. It is not enough to give " something " and withhold ourselves. Did you ever stop to think that your being in Church might strengthen some other worshiper, and that if you joined with hearty praise in the Common Prayer it would strengthen your parish fellowship on that particular morning?

This is vividly true when we consider the impression which our actions make upon children. If you are a parent with children and you " send " your children to Church without going with them, the

teaching of your actions will be far weightier than the sound of your words. The late Archbishop of Canterbury put this clearly when he said that in education, when suggestion and exhortation conflict, suggestion always wins. Your exhortations to your children will be weak beside the suggestion of your conduct. The words of the Chicago vestryman are worth remembering. Said he, "I never send my children to Church: I go with them." Do not forget also that your actions impress people far beyond the walls of your own home. If you want the Church to train your children or the children next door, do not reveal indifference to the Church in your own life. Do not act as if the movies were important and the Church unimportant. Please!

A Truth About Our Nature

It is a statement of some that they do not worship God in Church, for they prefer to do so in their own quiet gardens or in the seclusion of their parlors. There are two clear answers to this. First, most people, if they are really honest with themselves, readily admit that this statement is just TALK. They may say that they worship God every week for an hour in their gardens or in their houses — but they don't. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, this excuse is a weak evasion. If we are going to get things done, it is simple common sense to say that we need special times and special places in which to do them. You would not expect your child to receive an education if he stayed away from school, and studied anywhere or anytime in

the garden or in the parlor. The same thing is true about the worship of God. Unless we praise Him at particular times and places our faith will grow dim and vague. It is the people who go to Church who grow in the faith and in the knowledge of God, and it is those who do not go to Church who drift into the pagan and godless sea that is threatening our world. That is a fact which you can check by observation.

Secondly, even if it were true that we could worship God in these other places as well as in Church, what kind of God do we worship as we dig in the garden or walk the golf course? If we worship the God we have learned of in the Church, then, as far as our own religious life is concerned, we are living on " borrowed capital." We are receiving and not giving. Perhaps we read the Bible which was written by the Church, or use the Prayer Book for which men have worked, sacrificed and died. If we worship the Christian God through, and feed our souls by, these means, and do not attend Church, we are standing on the shoulders of the saints with no sense of our own debt to them or of our responsibility to those who will come after us. Not a very responsible procedure! Are we the " spoiled children of history " who receive the riches of our heritage with no sense of our own duties and responsibilities?

If we do not worship the God who speaks to us through these great " means of grace " which the Church has provided, what god do we worship? Is it a vague " something " in the garden? If so,

does this " feeling " in the garden make us penitent for our sins and fill us with the desire to serve our neighbor? Is a claim laid upon our lives by the golf links? Does a voice from the parlor sofa on which we are reclining make us regret our selfishness and lift our eyes to the needs of men? Are we guided and disciplined in this " worship " by our own scriptures, litany, and prayers and hymns that we so carefully have composed? What does " this infallible church of which you are the only member " give to your soul?

The truth about the matter is that human experience has revealed that God is not equally present for men in all places. He is more fully present in the Bible than in a rose bush, more truly present in the Sacrament of the altar than on a golf tee. The people who know Him most vividly on the sea, or in the garden, or in the beauty of nature, are those who have first learned of Him in Church. Once again this can be seen from observation. The heavens declare the glory of God to Christians, but to many others they declare nothing of the kind. And you, the reader, will find more of God in your garden if your memory is filled with the poetry of the Psalms and the grandeur of the Church's ancient prayers.

Perhaps you are one of those people who say that they like religion, but not organized religion.

Organized Religion

Now organized religion is not perfect. No man can claim that. But we can demand that people be reasonable. If education were not organized, and schools were closed and teachers dismissed, education as we know it would be dealt a fatal blow. Education, medicine, art, engineering — all of these things must organize or never be seriously effective. No vague, creedless, individualistic "religion" could have endured the storm and the stress of the ages, and no vague, individualistic, unorganized "religion" can have any impact upon the world. The ancient Church did not build up its organization because it was perverse. It did so because it was persecuted on the outside, and faced by occasional individuals on the inside who were proclaiming crazy teachings. If you are in battle you must organize, and in any organization you must have a constitution of some sort. We enjoy the Christian heritage because our forefathers were realists and passed on their treasures in and through this Church which Christ founded. (We are members also — be it gratefully remembered — of a disciplined Church that has preserved the rights of its laity in a democratic structure.) It would indeed be refreshing if all Christians were as realistic as the persecutors of Christianity, who in ancient times and in the present have struck their first blow against the Faith by attacking "organized religion." It is also true that there is some "red-tape" in the

Church. Anyone who has tried to call a rector to a parish, or tried to obtain the bishop's permission for this or that, knows how true that is. But what of it? So is there red-tape in schools, your lodge, your business, and the nation. How can any serious group of any size that wants things run " decently and in order " exist without it?

Perhaps you are one of those people who says that when you were young you went to Church, but that now you have "graduated" into the non-attendance class. But what happens when a man stops exercising after high school athletics? Very surely and slowly his body loses its " tone." Or what happens if we do not use our minds in any careful reading after we leave school? We lose the " edge " of our thinking power. What happens if, after mowing our lawn carefully for ten years, we stop mowing it? The answer is clear. America is in these ways a very practical nation. But it is often very silly and impractical when it comes to the life of the spirit. Is it not a great truth of life that we either struggle and work in everything we do or begin to go backwards? We maintain our position in nothing without diligence and care. We mow our lawns, clip our hedges, paint our houses, fight against weeds, grease our machines, exercise our bodies, and feed our minds. Very good! But when it comes to Faith, Hope, Charity, Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude and Justice — all these we expect to flower in the spirit of man without the slightest effort on our part. How silly! The results of this neglect are obvious in the world around us.

Let us quote a very sobering passage from J. Elton Trueblood's *The Predicament of Modern Man.* "Those who engage in personal counselling," writes he, "are aware of the constant problem of the religiously detached family in which the parents are amazed at the moral bankruptcy of their children. They cannot see why their children fail to have the same standards as their own, but in truth they have denied their children any practical contact with the ongoing tradition that is chiefly concerned with keeping these alive in our culture." Let us get out of our heads the idea that we are naturally good. The truth is that we are made into something half-decent by discipline and the Grace of God. If you assume with bland optimism that without spiritual training and discipline your child will grow into fine manhood, you may some day receive a rude shock.

Good Habits

There are some people who speak slightingly of Churchgoing as a "habit." They forget the important truth that man is a bundle of habits, and that there is nothing more important, as William James said, than building into ourselves good habits which will serve as firm tracks on which we may run our lives. Washing our faces in the morning is a good habit; having evenings when we settle down with a good book is an excellent habit; and so is Churchgoing. A sobering truth about habits is that if we do not deliberately build into ourselves good habits, we inevitably drift into bad habits. The man who does

not have the habit of washing his face has the bad habit of not washing his face. And the man who does not have the good habit of Church attendance has the bad habit of not attending Church.

What Do I Get Out of It?

The question — " What do I get out of it? " — is an unfortunate one. It is stepping out into the religious life on the wrong foot. Pastor Niemoeller has spent several years in concentration camps for the sake of his faith; Bishop Berggrav in Norway has been in danger of his life; and, while there is something to be said for the question, its tone is, when we consider these men, a little cheap. It misses the point for two reasons. (1) It forgets that in worship our primary purpose is to render to God a praise and a thanksgiving which He deserves. We go to Church to give. If there are benefits which come to man in worship, they come only when he truly worships in this manner. Whether you are in a great city cathedral or in a little country mission, this can be done. Worship is something that you, with the congregation, owe to God. (2) The question also misses the point because it fails completely to catch the spirit of our Lord. On the night in which He was betrayed He washed His disciples' feet and dried them with a towel. He told them that it was in this spirit that they were to approach all men. It would be far better if you were willing to ask, " What can I do to help my fellowmen? Do they need me? Can I help some child to grow in faith and hope? " You can see that the

original question is really not worthy of your better self, and misses the chief point of worship as " rendering to God His due."

But the great answer to the question is that worship is a meeting between God and man. It has two sides to it. God is always there waiting for us to turn to Him. This requires some preparation on our own part. This is not unreasonable, for each of us would prepare most carefully if tomorrow we had an audience with some earthly king. In worship we come into the presence of the King of kings, and if we prepare ourselves for a sincere confession of our sins, join in the prayers that are said, listen for some word from Scripture or sermon that is meant for us, we will come from worship steadied and strengthened on the road of life. If you wish to receive something from worship, you must go as a worshiper and not as a " spectator." You will then meet your Lord, and slowly, perhaps subtly over the years, your inner life will be deepened and enriched. Your faith will grow, and an inner stability will be given to you because your life is founded on the Rock of Ages.

Is it possible that a man can hear the majesty of the language of the Prayer Book, the vivid beauty of the parables, the greatness of the Psalms and not " get something out of it? " Is it possible that a man can sing the hymns written by his fellow mortals, who had a rare beauty in their pens, and not receive some wisdom in the process? The fault is surely, if we are frank with ourselves, not in these treasures of our heritage, but in ourselves. The

music may be played by a poor musician on a bad organ, but cannot you, nevertheless, link arms with Wesley, Bunyan, Brooks, and a host of others in a great hymn of praise? Have we so little imagination? And the sermon on many Sundays may be no work of art, but still if you are willing to hear it, there will be something in it for you. And it is likewise good for your souls to recognize that there is at least the possibility that Sunday after Sunday you could probably preach no better sermons than your rector. He is a human being even as you are.

The Joy of Worship

So far we have spoken in general of the duty of worship. We weak humans need constantly to be reminded of our responsibilities. To become a Christian is, indeed, merely to learn our responsibilities to God, our neighbor, our true selves, and our world. But there is also the greatest joy in worship. Many of the things we do in our lives we soon tire of, and their interest is confined to childhood, adolescence, or early maturity. But here in worship is a thread of gold that can gather all our years into a noble unity. Here is a strength offered to us which will steady our faltering steps as the course of life draws to its close. Here is the act in which we are joined to Him who is the true Source and End of our lives. Have you ever stopped to think that the long center aisle of the Church represents the Road of Life, and that down it there walk young people, old people, men and women, young brides to meet their husbands? At the end of that aisle there stands the

altar, which represents in its beauty the presence of God. It is the chief purpose of our lives so to walk the road of life through all things temporal that "we finally lose not the things eternal." Here is the road that has been trod by saints and martyrs before us. Here is the worship and praise of the God who loves us, a weekly act with the congregation which will be the keystone in the incompleted arch of your life. It is a duty. But it is also a joy. And until you begin to tread this way of life your heart will be restless and hungry, for one of the most certain things of life is that this world apart from God cannot bring peace or inner security to any man's heart.

Revive Thy Church, O Lord, beginning with me.

Make our hearts to burn within us, O Christ, as we walk with thee in the way and listen to thy words; that we may go in the strength of thy presence and thy truth all our journey through, and at its end behold thee, in the glory of the Eternal Trinity, God for ever and ever.

Dispel, O Lord, O Father of Lights, all clouds of doubt and the darknesses about our earthly course; that in thy light we may see light, and come both to know thee as we are known, and to love as we are loved; through Jesus Christ our Lord.